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XXVI.—WHITMAN AS A POET OF NATURE

I

The life of Walt Whitman may be divided roughly into two parts. The first extends from his birth on Long Island in 1819 to that "transparent summer morning" when he and his soul lay together on the grass and the sudden revelation came with its surpassing peace and knowledge; the second embraces the rest of his life, when he lived under the "potent, felt, interior command" and set forth his propaganda to America.

Like most modern mystics, Whitman was extremely sensitive to the voices of nature. Unlike most mystics, he travelled considerably and heard the voices of nature in many places. Thoreau, his contemporary, found nature communicative only when he stayed close to the house he was born in; Jefferies, another contemporary, limited his Continental wanderings to Paris and Brussels. But Whitman was almost equally at home in the Catskills, in New Orleans, in Missouri, in Colorado, on the Great Lakes, in Canada, in the neighborhood of Philadelphia. Twice in his life he made extensive trips; once, when he went to New Orleans and returned by way of Chicago and Niagara, again when he spent sixteen weeks in 10,000 miles of Western travel, extending his journeys to the Colorado Rockies. The prairies and mountains he found particularly eloquent; they seemed to breathe the spirit of his own poems. Everywhere the warmth of the day, the many shows of meadow and hill, the silent stars at night, uttered inarticulate but audible messages.

Yet, like most mystical poets of nature, he was passionately devoted to the country surrounding his birth-place.

He is the poet of Long Island, his fish-shaped Paumanok, almost as truly as Thoreau is the poet of Concord and Walden. This is but another way of saying that he is what no other American poet, save perhaps Longfellow, can pretend to be, the poet of the sea. West Hills, the birth-place of Whitman, is on the highest land of Long Island, three miles from the Sound and a dozen miles from the Atlantic. Here he spent his earliest years. At the age of four he was taken to Brooklyn, then a country village of 7,000 inhabitants, with muddy, unlighted roads as streets. Clam-digging, fishing excursions, bathing, eel-catching, gathering sea-gull's eggs, sailing along the shores amid the traditions of many wrecks, often to the eastern end of the Island, where he "spent many an hour on Turtle hill by the old lighthouse, on the extreme point, looking out over the ceaseless roll of the Atlantic"—such pleasures, together with walking inland, occupied the hours and days of his childhood, and gave him a peculiar intimacy with the dry uplands, the fragrant sedge-meadows, and the "passionless wet." This intimacy reappears again and again in *Leaves of Grass,* oftenest in the form of rhapsodical celebration, but often also in the form of scientifically accurate description. Although the essential Whitman was a poet, it is clear that he had also certain traits of the naturalist.

II

"Birds—And a Caution" is the title of a short entry in *Specimen Days.* The entry is characteristic of a mystical lover of nature, beginning as it does with a record of birds seen, and concluding with a stout apology for failure to name other species. The mystic or the poet of nature is not likely to be a good naturalist: he observes, not so much the facts, the external phenomena, as the

qualities that may be translated into terms of human emotion. A bird's song is less an approximation to music on the diatonic scale than a voice of nature which belongs to that bird peculiarly. Thoreau saw subtly rather than accurately; Lowell watched the birds of Elmwood sympathetically rather than closely; and Whitman, notwithstanding his friendship with Burroughs, was precise at one moment and heedless at the next. "I do not very particularly seek information," he says in this entry:

> You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds and trees and flowers and water-craft; a certain free margin, and even vagueness—perhaps ignorant credulity—helps your enjoyment of these things, and of the sentiment of feather'd, wooded, river, or marine Nature generally.

As a consequence one finds in Whitman's work frequent nondescript feathery things: "a" bird is singing, a sort of bird number A. Again, one may detect actual mistakes. The mocking-bird virtually never reaches Long Island—it is most improbable that Whitman ever heard of it there; yet he makes it the hero of one of his most intimate Paumanok poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Down by Timber Creek of an afternoon late in June he hears a delightful "song-epilogue (is it the hermit thrush?)," at a time when the hermit is chanting pensively on the Presidential Range; and I strongly suspect that the hermit thrush of the memorable poem on the death of Lincoln is no other than the wood thrush. But, of course, Whitman was substantially right in his criticism—you must not be too precise or scientific.

Nevertheless this large soul, "wandering and peering, dallying with all," had sufficient scientific interest—or call it a childish collecting instinct—to make lists of trees and flowers and birds. Of the three the bird-list is perhaps the most unusual. At the opening of May he noted

over thirty species that he had observed about Timber Creek; a number hardly comparable with the one hundred or so which a trained ornithologist could have discovered, but still a number far greater than the average farmer ever names. It is a curious catalogue. A sub-list indicates the early birds, the first arrivals: some of them are not in the general list, the meadow-lark loses his hyphen, the high-hole becomes the flicker (another name for the same bird), and a Wilson's thrush enters demurely, as if the poet had been introduced to the whole thrush family—a possibility somewhat disturbed by his doubts as to the hermit of the song-epilogue.

But stranger than Whitman's interest in birds and plant life is his absorption in astronomy. Of what use are the names of the constellations to a full-fledged mystic? Part of his interest may be explained by the influence of a Mr. Whitall ("who posts me up about the stars")—but Walt was certainly ready enough to listen and to ask questions. Passages like the following are clearly no more than *tours de force,* executed for private joy, with a dim eye on the future reader:

> The moon in her third quarter—the clusters of the Hyades and Pleiades, with the planet Mars between—in full crossing sprawl in the sky the great Egyptian X, (Sirius, Procyon, and the main stars in the constellations of the Ship, the Dove, and of Orion;) just north of east Boötes, and in his knee Arcturus, an hour high—

Not from nature did Whitman learn this various language!

When we turn to his poetry, we find, on the whole, fewer birds and flowers and trees than we expect. Insects are celebrated—the little is as great to the mystic as the great—but rarely with any enjoyment of their queer conversation (to use an old and excellent word). There are ants and katydids and gnats and butterflies and bees and even tumble-bugs rolling balls of dung; but only the bees

occur with any frequency. Of miscellaneous animals (including snakes, fish, fur-bearers, etc.) Whitman employed a veritable menagerie: we see in turn the moose, the prairie-dog, sow, quahaug, hyla, panther, alligator, bat, whale, buffalo, polar bear, walrus, herring, raccoon, sting-ray, and even a mastodon; yet few of these were more familiar to the poet than the baleful colossus at the end of the list.

With the trees of America Whitman was better acquainted. He names at intervals more than thirty varieties, including the yellow pine, sassafras, cotton-wood, and hackmatack. Although he mentions the pines oftenest, his particular favorites were the cedar and the live-oak. The latter is the subject of a poem in the Calamus series: alone and mossy it stands in a wide flat place in Louisiana,—"uttering joyous leaves of dark green." He could not thrive so remote from his fellows:—

. . . though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana solitary in a wide flat space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,
I know very well I could not.

It does not appear that Whitman knew many flowers, but so far as he mentioned them they are the varieties which he had reason to know well. He ignores the pretty poseys of flower poetry—the violet occurs but twice, the arbutus once—and characteristically bestows his attention on the mullein, dandelion, and poke-weed. Of garden and door-yard flowers he admits only the two that were precious through reminiscence,—white and red morning-glories and white and lavender lilacs. He emphasizes the delicate-colored blossoms of the latter, "with the perfume strong I love," set off by "heart-shaped leaves of rich green." Lilacs blooming in the dooryard occur in two poems other than "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Whitman always associated this flower with his childhood years on fish-shaped Paumanok; that is no doubt why he mentions it at least thrice as often as any other blossom.

But of the various phases of nature lore, Whitman was manifestly most interested in birds. They far outnumber the trees and flowers of *Leaves of Grass;* for no less than forty species appear in his catalogues or descriptive passages. Among them are such recondite creatures as the yellow-crowned heron, the snowy heron, the man-of-war bird (who, in a translation from the French, gets a poem all to himself), the redstart, the wood-duck, and the razor-billed auk. The hermit thrush occurs twice only, the "thrush" twice more. With the exception of the spiritual thrush and the ecstatic mocking-bird (the brown thrasher is, possibly, the bird alluded to), Whitman's birds are mostly big and bold. "The hawk, the seagull," he says in *Old Age Echoes,* "have far more possess'd me than the canary or mocking-bird," on account of a distaste for warbling and trilling and a love of soaring "in the fulness of power, joy, volition." This attitude is abundantly supported by examples in *Leaves of Grass.* The hawk is a great favorite, the eagle sails aloft when the buzzard is not there; one finds also many gulls, herons, partridges, owls, and wild turkeys. It was only in Whitman's later summers, spent out-of-doors in New Jersey, that he was attentive to the smaller birds and their songs. Then he listened regularly to "copious bird-concerts" at sunrise and sunset, finding the sunset music "more penetrating and sweeter—seem'd to touch the soul." To the robin he usually attributed a "reedy" note or trill; yet he had been "trying for years to get a brief term, or phrase, that would identify and describe that robin-call."

Whitman combined, as few poets have combined, a love of both the gentler and the wilder aspects of nature. The

quiet pastoral country of New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, and the boundless prairies and treeless mountains of the West were equally attractive to him. Born and bred on a large island, with clover and winding lanes and "cow-processions" about him and the moody ocean rolling its waves to the shore almost within hearing distance, he learned to love both pastoral and wild nature. The farmer constantly reappears in his poetry, and often enough "A Farm Picture" little inferior to the following:—

> Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
> A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses feeding,
> And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away—

which is at once quietly colored and skilfully composed.

But however often the land—gentle or mountainous—is celebrated in *Leaves of Grass,* the sea unquestionably receives the chief emphasis and casts its spell over the whole book. Not forgetting Longfellow and Swinburne, one may perhaps assert that among Anglo-Saxon poets Whitman stands foremost and wellnigh alone as an ardent lover of the ocean.

Even as a boy, he says in *Specimen Days,* he desired to write a poem about the sea-shore, "that suggesting, dividing line . . . blending the real and ideal." Later this desire seemed either hopeless or insufficient: he would take the sea not as a theme, but as "an invisible *influence,* a pervading gauge and tally." Then he goes on to tell of a memory that at intervals for years haunted him:

> a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low bass drums. This scene, this picture, I say, has risen before me at times for years. Sometimes I wake at night and can hear and see it plainly.

This is the "influence" of *Leaves of Grass*. It appears and reappears in a score of forms. There are mid-ocean poems, such as "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea," pictures of steamers leaving the docks, harbor poems ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and many others), poems on the foamy wake of ships, glimpses of Yankee clippers speeding under sky-sails, of regattas on the bay, of fleets of ice-boats, poems on ships wrecked at sea or on the rocks, retellings of old-time naval fights, a memory of the Great Eastern swimming up the bay, poems on Columbus, on fishermen fishing with nets, on clam-diggers, on views from Montauk Point, on bathers at the shore, on wild storms muttering and roaring and shouting. In "A Song of Joys" he exclaims:

O to go back to the place where I was born,
To hear the birds sing once more,
To ramble about the house and barn and over the fields once more,
And through the orchard and along the old lanes once more.
O to have been brought up on bays, lagoons, creeks, or along the coast,
To continue and be employ'd there all my life,
The briny and damp smell, the shores, the salt weeds exposed at low water,
The work of fishermen, the work of the eel-fisher and clam-fisher,
. . . . . .
In winter I take my eel-basket and eel-spear and travel out on foot on the ice . . .
Another time in warm weather out in a boat, to lift the lobster-pots where they are sunk with heavy stones (I know the buoys,)
. . . . . .
Another time mackerel-taking . . .
Another time fishing for rock-fish . . .

devoting almost ten times as much space to the sea surrounding Long Island as to the island itself. Virtually all of Whitman's truest poetry is concerned in some way with the sea: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "When Lilacs

Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and such passages as that beginning "I am he that walks with the tender and growing night." He describes the aspects and moods of the sea with rare vividness and sympathy. Men and women, so like himself, and the curious liquid identity so unlike himself, with its "mad pushes of waves upon the land"—these two enkindled his imagination more readily than any other influences. The long sailing-expeditions of his boyhood and early manhood, the amorous bathing by the smooth seashore, the eel-spearing and clam-digging and fishing, the midnight rambles along the water with its white gleams fitfully leaping, these all return again and again in *Leaves of Grass*. Reminiscence, which Whitman indulged far less than his literary progenitors such as Rousseau and Wordsworth, brought the sea and its shores and joys no matter where he went—that dream of the white-brown shore and the thumping, rustling waves never forsook him.

When Whitman, in his collection of poems on comradeship, desired to present ideal friendship in ideal surroundings, he had recourse to the sea:

> . . . the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,
> When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,
> When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing, bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
> And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,
> O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourished me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,
> And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,
> And that night when all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,
> I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover
in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined
toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was
happy.

Again, when he wrote several poems on the death of President Lincoln, he included "O Captain! My Captain!" Here, as elsewhere in his writings, America (or Democracy) is a ship, with Lincoln as captain. The war is over, the nation is welded in blood, more closely than ever:

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

More conspicuous and significant, however, is Whitman's use of the sea as a symbol of life after death. It appears as the theme of no less than ten poems, including the long "Passage to India," "Joy, Shipmate, Joy," "New Finalè to the Shore," "Sail out for Good, Eidólon Yacht!" Among the "Songs of Parting" he writes:

Joy, shipmate, joy!
(Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry,)
Our life is closed, our life begins,
The long, long anchorage we leave,
The ship is clear at last, she leaps!
She swiftly courses from the shore,
Joy, shipmate, joy.

The green waves, rolling in on Paumanok, the far horizon faint against the sky, never lost their strangeness. The miracles of the land seemed to Whitman no less wonderful but certainly more tangible, but the miracles of the sea remained forever inscrutable. Liquidness was curious enough, but liquidness and vastness in one, constantly inconstant in mood, formed a mystery akin to that of death and new life.

III

Whitman had early developed an unusual sensuous receptivity, which was in part maintained in robustness—preserved from languor and purposeless enjoyment—by the masculine rudeness of shore life. The gray fogs of spring and autumn, the buffeting winds and leaping waves of winter storms, doubtless did something to keep his emotions from degenerating into unhealthy dreaminess. He was unduly excitable rather than dreamy; a lawless neurotic strain in the family (the youngest son was an imbecile, the oldest died a lunatic) seemed to show itself in the youthful Walt. "A very strange boy," his mother called him afterward, and he himself, despite his sailing-trips and clam-digging, described his boyhood as unhappy. Companionship, sensuously close, brought him pleasure scarcely second to that afforded by nature. He was tremulously stirred by the mere *nearness* of other human beings, other "identities," he would have called them later; it was a constant emotional surprise to him, as he wandered through the streets of New York, that so many creatures, outwardly and inwardly akin to him, should exist under the same sun and stars on this curious earth. Men and women here, by the millions, out there limitless waters, and overhead the uncountable stars throbbing in silence! A strange world indeed, whose strangeness pressed upon him more and more as he rambled alone, or sought companionship, or read the classics of literature out-of-doors, shouting passages to the booming surf, or went to the theatre, where he saw life concentrated, or to the opera house, where the melody and grandeur of music stirred him deeply. He had, moreover, encountered the mystery of sex, had felt the "amorous madness." His intellectual nature was, on the whole, being

ignored; some discipline he may have received from his reading and from his journalistic work and school-teaching, but it was certainly not proportioned to his emotional growth. The result of all these influences, affecting in order and in unison a receptive soul, was a mystical experience. Just when the revelation came we cannot say, but it was probably not many years before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Walt was no stripling at the time, so much is certain—rather a man over six feet tall, almost passing the prime of life.

It was Dr. Bucke who first pointed out a certain paragraph in Whitman's "Song of Myself" as the expression of mystical revelation. Though familiar, it is worth quoting here; the poet is addressing his soul:—

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you felt my feet.
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm-fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

Two things are noteworthy in this passage; in the first place, a mystical sense of the unity of the universe, the feeling of kinship and equal divinity with all men and all things, down to the minute ants and mossy scabs, united by the spirit of love and total acceptance—in short, an expression of the foundation of Whitman's life and writ-

ings; in the second place, the fact that the sudden awakening came as he lay in the open air on a summer morning.

The awakening occurred under the blue sky. Nature was the source of Whitman's deepest impressions in his early years, and the source of his spiritual realization. Much has been said of Whitman's Christ-like brotherly love, of his celebration of democracy, of his frankness in sexual matters. Not enough has been said, I am inclined to believe, of his relation to outer nature, of the sensuous basis of that relation, and of the sensuous basis of his relation to man. The primary importance of sensuousness in his life and in his poetry seems to me unquestionable. His senses were unusually powerful and delicate. Virtually all the influences that led to his mystical awakening were, as we have seen, sensuous. He had done little thinking about life and men, but a great deal of feeling. He had read the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer, Greek tragedy, Dante, Hindoo poems, the *Nibelungenlied,* Ossian, and Scott; in them he found chiefly wondrous pictures of the past and resonant lines which he could declaim as he ran up and down the shore. He read them, not in the thoughtful surroundings of the library, but on the sand, beside the rocks, and under the trees. All books, he says, and all philosophy and religion, should be tested in the open air. He spoke his own poems to the wind and bade his readers do likewise. "Talk as you like," a cañon or a great stretch of plains can rouse "those grandest and subtlest element-emotions" as no sculpture, paintings, poems, or even music, probably ever can. The open-air test always, and the open air eventually more meaningful than the works of man reacting on earthly existence: thus does Whitman exalt the intuitions of the senses. That he possessed a fund of intellectuality is evident from a perusal of his critical estimates; that he possessed a fund of it

sufficient to counter-balance his sensuous alertness is not so evident; that he frequently exhibited the indispensable quality of common sense is denied by his *Leaves of Grass* and by the prefatory pronunciamentos which graced the various editions of that book. The natural health of his body was enough to make him rebel at the artistic productions of Europe, that "hysterical sick-chamber." It made him rebel at anything tainted with morbidness: health, not delirium, he writes in a passage about Poe, is always essential. In this way, a sensuous way, he could judge true values. From philosophy, especially from the romantics like Schelling and Hegel, he derived only a justification of his own sensuous way of life—he did not concern himself with Aristotle, or even with Plato. So far as he had them, Whitman's intellectuality and good sense sprang, somewhat like Keats's, from the feminine intuitions of the poet rather than from masculine reason. Health, sensuous spontaneity, decided all matters for him. But although he put aside what he called delirium, he was not aware, it seems, that there may be a delirium that comes from the excessive health and sensuousness of a robust nature.

"The exquisite realization of health" was the mainspring of all of Whitman's passions. He rhapsodizes over his "perfect and enamour'd body"; he sings the body and its parts and purposes endlessly; he celebrates the deliciousness of the sexes; there is not a trace of New England Puritanism in him, at least so far as the negative side of it is concerned. The body and the soul are his two themes, one as important as the other. "All comes by the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe." Without health there is nothing worth the having. Everything comes through the senses, those mysterious miracles and instant conductors. Who would condemn the body, when

" the spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body, if not more? "—the two are really inseparable. In most poets we can readily observe one sense which is of dominant importance; usually, of course, the sense of sight. But Whitman was abnormally developed: virtually every faculty was wide-awake and responded immediately. In a large number of his catalogues he jumbles impressions received through eye, ear, and the sense of touch. In his threnody on the death of President Lincoln, a more carefully elaborated poem than he usually composed, he chooses three *motifs*—

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,—

employing the three senses of smell, sight, and hearing, in the fragrance of the lilac, the drooping shine of the star, and the tender chant of the hermit thrush. Everywhere in his poems we find the words " sight," " sound," and so on, commonly preceding a rhapsody on the sense mentioned. Sometimes the device is entirely deliberate, as in " Salut au Monde," in which he invites us to take his hand while we see

Such gliding wonders! such sights and sounds!

After a score of lines, the poet prods us into asking " What do you hear Walt Whitman?" which gives Walt permission to unload nineteen " I hear's." Then, by no means weary, we inquire, " What do you see Walt Whitman?" Alas, he is more than ready with his " I see's " (including, if I recall aright, only two " beholds " and one " I look ") to the amazing number of ninety-seven! Whereupon he concludes by firing an endless salute of " You's," and returns from " all the haunts and homes of men " in triumph and with a sense of duty done.

Of Whitman's senses only one was normal—the sense of

taste. In his 430 pages of rather closely-printed poetry, one cannot, unless I have read hastily, find a single significant reference to the sense of taste. There is, to be sure, a juicy and flavorous blackberry, and casual reference to the taste of fresh air; but the latter is not so much a matter of taste as of pleasure in filling the lungs, and the former, a poor solitary berry, does not greatly affect the assertion that the sense of taste plays no part in Whitman's poetry. In his diary there is again only one instance,—" the wild and free and somewhat acrid " flavor of cedar fruit. Whitman had not the romantic desire to taste miscellaneous fruits and roots and berries, and took only normal pleasure in the foods and drinks of civilization.

To divine the importance of the sense of touch is not so easy. Often what seems a matter of touch proves on closer inspection to concern all the senses. Whitman was magnetically drawn to human beings, for instance—liked to join hands with friends when he talked, enjoyed feverishly at times the feeling of proximity, celebrated not only the love of the sexes but " the dear love of comrades " in terms of bodily contact—but how largely the sense of touch was concerned is by no means clear. " The float and odor of hair," involving two other senses, is a phrase that suggests the part played in this connection by senses other than touch. The song of the thrush may be enjoyed by only one sense, but the touch of human beings, " the souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked," the whir and pressure of the wind as one races " naked along the shore," certainly involve other senses. In any event, however, it is obvious that Whitman responded powerfully to the touch of flesh on flesh, the heat of the sun that comes " streaming kissingly," the gentle caress of the wind, " laving one's face and hands," and the amorous weight and curious liquidness of sea-waves. " To touch

my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand," he says in his "Song of Myself";

> Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity . . . .
> My flesh and blood playing out lightnings to strike what is hardly different from myself,

until the fellow-senses seem to slip away, "bribed to swap off with touch," and he is at the mercy of one sense:

> You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat,
> Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

Even when, as an old invalid, he was presented with a horse and buggy, he changed his gift horse for a livelier animal, and drove into the wind gloriously at the rate of eighteen miles an hour!

The sense of sight, the most abundantly used of the five, was of considerable moment to Whitman; "bereft of light," he would have suffered as keenly as most poets. Color always delighted him, particularly the colors of the sky both day and night. He does not celebrate wet, cloudy, colorless days, but gorgeous sunrises and sunsets and the delicate colors of clear or filmy days. When he lived at Timber Creek after paralysis attacked him, he paid special attention to "sky views and effects," which he watched from "peculiar spots" according to the views and effects that the hour promised. Late of a May afternoon he could see strange shows "in light and shade—enough to make a colorist go delirious," which implies a suspicious sympathy with the colorist. He had an eye for pictorial effect: "As I slowly hobble up the lane toward day-close, an incomparable sunset shooting in molten sapphire and gold, shaft after shaft, through the ranks of the long-leaved corn, between me and the west." On another day his only entry was an attempt to describe the various greens of trees:

"The rich dark green of the tulip-trees and the oaks, the gray of the swamp-willows, the dull hues of the sycamores and black-walnuts, the emerald of the cedars (after rain,) and the light yellow of the beeches." Liver-color and amber were two colors that he recorded frequently. At the shore he watched "amber-rolling waves, changing as the tide comes in to a transparent tea-color." In a St. Louis plate glass factory he saw molten stuff, "of a glowing pale yellow color," in a pot, and declared "that Pot, shape, color, concomitants, more beautiful than any antique statue," and he saw a glorious "pale redtinged yellow," and later an aurora borealis blue-green at a zinc smelter that gave him "new revelations in the color line."

The hours of darkness also showed him many hues and tints. Frequently his nights are blue-black and full-starr'd. He was extremely interested in the stars—though he named them so late in life that he produced no adequate catalogue in his poetry. Jupiter is a "huge hap-hazard splash"; he sees the branches of the Milky Way; the moon, a lady whom he loved as delicately as an Elizabethan, is dressed in shimmering "pellucid green and tawny vapor," or "a transparent blue-gray," or "an aureole of tawny transparent brown" and "clear vapory light-green." He delighted in making trips on the Delaware—or on the Mississippi—in the moonlight. Without the night and the stars, he says somewhere, there could not well be any spirituality.

The sense of hearing offered another inlet of spirituality. In *Leaves of Grass* it is as prominent as the sense of sight—"I hear" usually follows "I see"; and in *Specimen Days* he begins a typical entry with a picture, and then, after a mechanical "For Sounds" as a sort of For Sale sign, evaluates the delights which the place affords the ear. The bumble-bee bears down on him with "a loud

swelling perpetual hum, varied now and then by something almost like a shriek"; which seems a good background, he says, applying a term of painting to music, for some bumble-bee symphony. He catches well the quality of the tree-toads' chirrup and trill—they are "fretting" and they "purr." Several times he endeavors to describe adequately the song of the cicada and succeeds tolerably. In the winter the ice over the creek sighs and snorts. When the birds are migrating he hears overhead by night "a velvety rustle, long drawn out." He enjoyed the songs of birds so much that he attended their matins and vespers, and especially in the evening was "quite strictly punctual." Less conventional was his delight at hearing "the sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind." From his earliest years he declaimed Homer and Shakespeare to the waves, and even when at Timber Creek, recovering from a stroke of paralysis, he concluded his wrestles with a sapling by bellowing "the stock poets or plays" and negro and army songs while the echoes reimbursed him fully, and an owl on the other side of the creek "sounded *too-oo-oo-oo-oo,* soft and pensive (and I fancied a little sarcastic)." In "A Song of Joys" he sang those of the orator,—not a placid, saintly orator like Emerson,—but one who could "roll the thunder of the voice out from the ribs and throat" and thus "lead America." He was passionately fond of music—heard operas with great enjoyment in his New York years, liking especially those of Verdi and Donnizetti; in "Proud Music of the Storm" he refers to "Italia's peerless compositions." Later a Beethoven septette affected him profoundly, more than anything he had heard previously. But cheap, everyday songs affected him no less: he lingered, of a February night along the Delaware, listening to "the echoing calls of the railroad men in the West

Jersey depot yard," calls with such "musical, emotional effects, never thought of before," that he could not leave the scene.

Even a cursory inspection of *Leaves of Grass* or of *Specimen Days* will suffice to show the unusual emphasis in Whitman on the sense of smell. He could detect fragrance in wellnigh everything. Not only summer but early-summer has a perfume all its own. There is an "exquisite smell of the earth at daybreak, and all through the forenoon"; the evening has its sweet and slightly aromatic air; and "the natural perfume belonging to the night alone" winds up the series, with only the afternoon omitted. The odors of apples, of the cedar, and of Indian corn pervade many of Whitman's pages. Corn when gathered has an aroma "rich, rare, ripe, peculiar," and at night is "just-palpable." He was fond of just-palpable odors, the most spiritual doubtless, but he also professed a love for the strong perfume of lilac flowers. He pulled everlasting and stuffed it in his trousers-pocket "for scent." The complex impressions of night came to him, he says, chiefly through the sense of smell. He discerned countless odors: those of grass, moist air, milk, willows, matted leaves, swamps, green leaves and dry leaves, hair, birch-bark, sea-rocks, shore mud. "There is a scent to everything," he wrote in his diary, "even the snow, if you can detect it—no two places, hardly any two hours, anywhere exactly alike. How different the odor of noon from midnight, or winter from summer, or a windy spell from a still one." Keenness of scent can hardly go farther, in man at least.

Obviously Whitman had a body admirably adequate to his demands on it. He gloried in his health, I have said, since from his point of view the spirit receives from the body as much as, if not more than it gives. One word that

recurs constantly in Whitman's prose and verse is "absorbing." It may be found in his earliest poem, in which as the caresser of life, he is absorbing all, "not a person or object missing"; and it may be found in the fragments written in his last years, when he looks back on his life of "wandering, peering, dallying with all—war, peace, day and night absorbing." Sometimes he drinks or takes in, or is filled, or deposits, or feasts, or gets nutriment, or is suffused, or finds sustenance, but most of these occur only once: absorbing was his favorite word for the idea of exaltation through the bounties brought by the senses. He absorbed anything as bulky as Canada, or as impalpable as the dusky green of the cedar. Everything was to him so much spiritual food—but food is a poor word, implying as it does only one channel of delight. With his whole body, with every sense, he absorbed the land, the people on it, the sea, and the interminable starry heights above. The absorption was so immediate that he even spoke of the "soul senses."

This desire to have all parts of the universe filter into his body was due to Whitman's mystical conception of the unity between man and nature, together constituting God. The universe is a "nebulous float," indestructible, eternal, and divine even unto the trees in the ground and the weeds of the sea. He himself is "effusing and fluid" in this divine solution,—"a phantom curiously floating." Sometimes he asserts that objects are merely the symbols of the unseen; such is his tenor when most deliberate. But elsewhere he proclaims, as in his "Song for Occupations," that "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one," and certainly in practice he embraces every object passionately, as if it were of final and infinite excellence. Objects have what he has, a body and soul strangely blended; and the separateness, or "identity," of each object is only an ap-

pearance, for any identity may be "of one phase and of all phases." All individuals, and all objects are thus at once microcosm and macrocosm. The unifying force in the universe is love, a passionate sympathy, by which all objects are, as it were, dissolved in the "eternal float of solution." This love is the sympathy which one feels in moving the hand over one's naked body; it is the flooding emotion which comes to one in a gathering of fellow men and women; it is the refreshing solemnity or the primitive joy one has in contemplating the clouds roving silent in the blue sky. This force, which radiates and transfuses the whole cosmos, makes life, all life, any manner of life, an endless blessing. It obliterates values, causes the here and now, no matter how mean or pitiful if judged conventionally, to be utterly glorious. "All goes onward and outward"; there is no pause in the everlasting, accumulating procession of the world's excellences.

This conception of existence, in its pell-mell acceptance of everything, and its passionate insistence on equality, and its conviction of perfectibility, is surely a philosophy of optimism raised to the highest degree—is, indeed, as William James somewhat bluntly called it, "an indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe." Whitman suffered, one is compelled to admit, from a delirium of health: not the robust health of the athlete, but rather the too-eager health of the poet, not the health of the physical constitution, but rather the health of the senses. An exquisite sensuousness is not, indeed, to be shunned by the poet—far from it; but when (as Villain Touch overpowered good Walt) the poet yields to the senses and luxuriates in them and suffers his intellectual relation to life to go begging, one can no longer read his poems with full conviction of their authenticity. Whitman was no tower-of-ivory dreamer—he craved human companion-

ship to such an extent that he grew stale in solitude—but he was, what is less reprehensible though not much less deplorable, over-anxious to "get rapport" with the infinities, to go beyond "I and this mystery, here we stand." With all his senses alert, every pore open to hints and indirections, he would absorb spirituality till his soul was content. But true spirituality is not to be so easily won. He was inebriate; the true poet is serene.

NORMAN FOERSTER.